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Biden Reportedly Selects Rep. Deb Haaland as First-Ever Native American Interior Secretary by [Mary F.](#)

US President-elect Joe Biden is currently in the process of assembling his Cabinet. US lawmakers have urged Biden to nominate diverse members to establish an inclusive government. Specifically, officials have called on Biden to nominate an Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) to fill one of the remaining "secretary-level" positions.

Biden tapped Rep. Deb Haaland (D-NM) to serve as the first Native American secretary of the US Department of the Interior, which oversees tribal affairs, according to multiple Thursday reports by US media, [including the Washington Post](#), [NPR](#) and the [New York Times](#).

The Department of the Interior will play a role in Biden's attempt to combat global warming. The president-elect has promised to ban all new oil and gas drilling on public lands and waters, fuel from which accounts for almost a quarter of the US' annual carbon output, the [Post reported](#).

"I come from New Mexico. It's a big gas and oil state. And I care about every single job," Haaland said in a [recent interview with the Washington Post](#). "We don't want to go back to normal, right? We don't want to go back to where we were because that economy wasn't working for a lot of people."

The Department of the Interior is also responsible for overseeing protected areas including more than 100 million acres of wilderness and 422 national park sites. It is further responsible for protecting more than 1,000 endangered species and water projects in the West that provide drinking water for large cities like Las Vegas and Los Angeles.

On Wednesday, Speaker of the US House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi called Haaland "one of the most respected and one of the best Members of Congress I have served with."

"I am so proud that, as one of the first Native American women to have served in Congress, she serves as Chair of the Natural Resources Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands," Pelosi said. "Congresswoman Haaland knows the territory, and if she is the President-elect's choice for Interior Secretary, then he will have made an excellent choice."

Biden's alleged decision also comes as the federal government's relationship with Native American tribes has deteriorated under US President Donald Trump's administration, which [eliminated protections from sacred tribal sites](#) in Utah's Bears Ears National Monument and [permitted oil drilling](#) in Alaska's Arctic National Wildlife Refuges.

About Haaland

Haaland, 60, was born in Arizona to a Native American mother in the Navy and a Norwegian American father who served as an active-duty Marine. Haaland went to 13 different public schools as a child as her family moved to various military bases.

"As kids we moved a lot because my dad was in the service, but no matter where we were he would take us outside," Haaland told the Post. "In New Mexico we would hike in Jemez during a rainstorm, or at other military bases we would visit the ocean."

Haaland has a law degree from the University of New Mexico and served as the chair of the Democratic Party of New Mexico's Native American Caucus from 2012 to 2013.

She was also elected to a two-year term as the chair of the Democratic Party of New Mexico in April 2015, and her tenure saw New Mexico Democrats gain control of the state House of Representatives and the office of the New Mexico secretary of state.

Haaland has been the US representative from New Mexico's 1st congressional district since 2019, becoming one of the first Indigenous women to be elected to Congress. Haaland is a member of Pueblo of Laguna, a tribe of Native American Pueblo people in west-central New Mexico, near the city of Albuquerque.

Biden's Diverse Cabinet

Biden has maintained his promise of establishing a diverse Cabinet and administration. In addition to choosing Sen. Kamala Harris (D-CA), whose mother emigrated from India, as his vice president, Biden has also nominated American Progress President Neera Tanden, who is of Indian descent, as director of the Office of Management and Budget, [The Hill reported](#). Capitol Hill staffer Katherine Tai, the daughter of Taiwanese immigrants, has also been chosen by Biden as US trade representative. Vivek Murthy, the son of Indian immigrants, has been selected to return to his former role of US surgeon general.

In addition, Janet Yellen has been chosen to be the first female treasury secretary under the Biden administration, while Lloyd Austin has been nominated to be the first Black defense secretary. Alejandro Mayorkas will be the first immigrant and first Latino to head the homeland security department if confirmed, [Reuters reported](#).

On Wednesday, Biden also announced former campaign trail rival Pete Buttigieg as his choice US secretary of transportation. If confirmed by the Senate, the former mayor of South Bend, Indiana would be the first openly gay member of a presidential Cabinet.

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Over 370 International Spiritual Leaders Sign Declaration Seeking to Ban Conversion Therapy by [Mary F.](#)

Conversion therapy is a dangerous practice that aims to change a person's sexual or gender identity. The practice, which targets LGBTQ youth, has been "rejected by every mainstream medical and mental health organization for decades," according to the Human Rights Campaign.

This week, more than 370 international spiritual leaders called for a global ban on [conversion therapy](#) by signing a declaration spearheaded by the Global Interfaith Commission on LGBT+ Lives, an organization that "aims to provide a strong and authoritative voice from religious leaders across the global faith community who wish to affirm and celebrate the dignity of all, independent of a person's sexuality, gender expression and gender identity," [according to its website](#).

In a statement on its website, the organization urged for an "end to violence and criminalization against LBGT+ people and for a global ban on conversion therapy."

“We call for all attempts to change, suppress or erase a person’s sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression – commonly known as ‘conversion therapy’ – to end, and for these harmful practices to be banned,” the declaration reads. “We ask for forgiveness from those whose lives have been damaged and destroyed on the pretext of religious teaching”.

The declaration’s signatories include more than 370 international spiritual leaders from the Christian, Jewish, Sikh, Muslim, Buddhist and Hindu religions across 35 countries and include Nobel Peace Prize winner Archbishop Emeritus Desmond M. Tutu of South Africa and Rabbi Mel Gottlieb, president of the Academy for Jewish Religion in California.

Conversion therapy, also referred to as reparative therapy, has involved techniques such as ice-pick lobotomies, chemical castration and aversive conditioning treatments such as applying electric shock to the genitals. More recent techniques used in the US include counseling, visualization, psychoanalytic therapy and spiritual interventions.

According to the [American Medical Association](#), conversion therapy is based on the false assumption that homosexuality and gender identity are mental disorders that can be changed. Conversion therapy can cause “significant psychological distress,” according to the medical organization, which cites a study that shows that 77% of people subjected to conversion therapy reported significant long-term adverse effects including depression, anxiety, lowered self-esteem, internalized homophobia, self-blame, intrusive imagery and sexual dysfunction. “Participants also reported significant social and interpersonal harm, such as alienation, loneliness, social isolation, interference with intimate relationships and loss of social supports,” the American Medical Association warns.

According to [Born Perfect](#), an organization that aims to end conversation therapy, the discredited practice has been banned in 20 US states, including California, Connecticut, Maryland, New Jersey and Washington.

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Biden Campaign Deletes Attack Ad Against Buttigieg After Cabinet Nomination
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

US President-elect Joe Biden has touted the diversity of his Cabinet nominees, although many have come under fire from journalists and critics for their questionable backgrounds and political connections despite their identities. Ironically, for Pete Buttigieg, the muckraker was Biden himself in an ad 10 months ago.

In the wake of nominating Buttigieg to head the US Department of Transportation, Biden’s campaign team has gone back and deleted an attack ad against the former South Bend, Indiana, mayor from earlier this year.

The ad ran on February 8, just days after Buttigieg trounced Biden in the Iowa caucuses. [It has been pulled from YouTube](#), Facebook and Twitter.

[Sputnik reported on the attack ad](#) when it came out, noting it unfavorably contrasted Biden’s work with Buttigieg’s.

"Both Vice President Biden and former Mayor Buttigieg have taken on tough fights," the video narrator said. "Under threat of a nuclear Iran, Joe Biden helped to negotiate the Iran deal, and under the threat of disappearing pets, Buttigieg negotiated lighter licensing regulations on pet chip scanners."

"Both Vice President Biden and former Mayor Pete have helped shape our economy. Joe Biden helped save the auto industry, which revitalized the economy of the Midwest, and led the passage and the implementation of the Recovery Act, saving our economy from a depression," she added. "Pete Buttigieg revitalized the sidewalks of downtown South Bend by laying out decorative brick."

Buttigieg's campaign decided to swing from where it was standing, denouncing Biden's dismissal of a small town as proof of why Buttigieg was running.

"At this moment, the American people are crying out for something completely different from this classic Washington-style of politics," Buttigieg's national press secretary, Chris Meagher, [said in a statement, according to The Hill](#). "While Washington politics trivializes what goes on in communities like South Bend, South Bend residents who now have better jobs, rising income and new life in their city don't think their lives are a Washington politician's punchline."

"Pete's on-the-ground experience as mayor, turning around a Midwestern industrial city, is exactly why he is running for president," he continued. "The vice president's decision to run this ad speaks more to where he currently stands in this race than it does about Pete's perspective as a mayor and veteran."

However, their tune very quickly changed, and just weeks later, [Buttigieg endorsed Biden in a surprise campaign suspension](#) immediately before the Super Tuesday primaries, being joined in the move by Sen. Amy Klobuchar (D-MN).

This Wednesday, no hint was evident of Biden's belief in Buttigieg's lack of experience, or of Buttigieg's belief in Biden's stale and out-of-touch politics.

"A mayor from the heartland, a management expert, a policy wonk with a big heart, a veteran, lieutenant in the United States Navy Reserve, an intelligence officer deployed to Afghanistan while he was mayor. A new voice with new ideas, determined to move past old politics," [Biden gushed in Wilmington, Delaware](#), when he announced Buttigieg's nomination, adding that he's "one of the smartest people you'll ever meet and one of the most humble."

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US Recognizing Morocco's Claims 'Made Visible the Question of Western Sahara' - Polisario Diplomat

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Sputnik recently spoke with Omeima Abdeslam, the Polisario Front representative to Switzerland, about how US President Donald Trump's declaration could impact the territory and Polisario's struggle against occupying Moroccan forces that resumed last month after a 29-year period of peace.

Earlier this month, the Trump administration engineered the normalization of relations between Israel and yet another Arab state: Morocco. As a quid pro quo for this move, Trump issued a declaration recognizing Morocco's claims to sovereignty over Western Sahara, a non-self-governing territory it has claimed since 1975.

In doing so, Trump contravened a long-standing United Nations recognition of the Polisario Front as the legitimate representatives of the indigenous Saharawi people, for whom [the UN has promised an independence referendum](#).

International Pressure Needed to Defend Saharawis' Rights

Abdeslam said the Saharawis "made a big mistake" by trusting the international community. "We thought that with our good behavior, that they were going to reward us with our right of self-determination. Now, we can see that we were very naive."

"The Trump move will not affect the Saharawi resistance and struggle for their independence," she said. "At the contrary, the move of Trump has [made] the Saharawis more united and more persistent to get their independence by all means, including the armed struggle ... and will not end until total independence."

She warned the move was a "green light, that any country can invade any country, and nothing happens."

Polisario hopes the international community "makes a strong barrier against this decision and makes a strong commitment, political will, to permit the Saharawi people the right to self-determination and freedom," the diplomat added.

"We hope [US President-elect Joe] Biden will make the move to step back [on] this decision because it's really hurt a lot of people and hurt international law, which protects everybody in the world."

She said that a major way the international community can push back is to recognize the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), which is already a full member of the African Union and has been recognized by as many as 84 UN member states, although currently only 39 do so. Polisario declared the existence of the state on February 27, 1976, four months after the end of Spanish rule.

Without Independence, Foreign Mining is 'Plunder'

As with many occupied lands, Western Sahara is a land rich in natural resources. Morocco has pumped billions of dollars into building some of the world's largest phosphate mines, and companies have repeatedly expressed interest in exploring for oil off the coast. [Earlier this year, Morocco laid claim](#) to fisheries off the coast.

However, [a 2002 legal ruling by the United Nations found that drilling](#) in Western Sahara was only legal if it were done for the "benefit of the peoples" living there, adding that if the extractions "were to proceed in disregard of the interests and wishes of the people of Western Sahara, they would be in violation of the principles of international law."

Abdeslam noted that Trump's move had "made visible the question of Western Sahara," exposing all the companies profiting without Saharawis' consent over the years.

"This, in international law, is called 'plunder,'" she said, noting that Western Sahara has been listed as a non-self-governing territory since 1963.

"We hope that these organizations now step back until the conflict is over. Of course, the Saharawi people will assure the interest of all the companies who are working. First is to make the legal status of the territory very clear - and after that, we are going to make business."

Status of Refugees Unchanged

Since seizing the territory in 1975 in the wake of the departure of Spanish colonial administrators, Morocco has faced the militant resistance of the Saharawis. In response, Rabat has built a series of sand walls encompassing almost the entire coastline, containing all urban areas and natural resources, leaving the SADR in control of the inland desert. The government-in-exile rules from Tandouf, Algeria, where more than 100,000 Saharawi refugees have lived for decades.

Abdeslam dismissed the notion that Trump's decision could negatively affect the refugees.

"The Saharawi refugees are not refugees of hunger; they are refugees of dignity," she said. "I don't think that [anyone] can oblige them to live in Algeria. They have created a state in exile to show the world that they want to live in their homeland Western Sahara, and that is why they have resisted for 45 years in exile ... If the conflict is resumed militarily or by vote, these refugees will return to their land. The help that they will receive is dependent on the status of the conflict."

Polisario's Strategic Objectives Unchanged

In 1991, Polisario and Morocco agreed to a ceasefire, and the United Nations created a special mission, MINURSO, to oversee the holding of a referendum on independence in Western Sahara. However, by 2020, the referendum had still not occurred, and [Saharawis staged a protest in October intended to draw](#) the UN's attention as it was preparing to vote on renewing MINURSO's mission.

By November 13, the war was back on after the Moroccan military dispersed the demonstration with force, and the Saharawi army began staging attacks on Moroccan forces garrisoning the sand wall. A month later, Washington announced its recognition of Morocco's claims over Western Sahara, and the US ambassador to Morocco appeared next to a map showing the territory as a contiguous part of Morocco.

"The resumption of war is the [detonating factor] that makes Morocco run [asking] for help from Trump," Abdeslam said. "The Polisario Front has been created to free Western Sahara from all kinds of oppressors and illegal occupiers so it will only disappear when this objective is achieved. The strategy of the people of Western Sahara and their leadership, the POLISARIO Front, is to continue the fight until Western Sahara is free. No one - [neither] Trump nor Moroccan - can decide the future of Western Sahara, only Saharawis can decide anything in Western Sahara."

Moroccans Are Repressed as Much as Saharawis

Winning recognition of its claims came at a steep price for Rabat: diplomatic recognition of Israel, a country with which it had technically been at war since 1948. [As Sputnik has reported, the Moroccan monarchy](#) has long maintained secret links with Israel, but public opinion in Morocco strongly favors the Palestinian struggle.

In the aftermath of the move, [Moroccan authorities dispersed anti-Israel protests in Rabat](#), and since the outbreak of war last month, they have heavily cracked down on pro-Polisario activists, [a move Amnesty International has strongly decried](#). Abdeslam said the two struggles are linked, and that both populations' hatred of oppression could be the force that unites them against their oppressors.

"In Morocco, the Palestinian issue is sacred. But now we see that the government of Morocco has forbidden any kind of manifestation in favor of Palestinian people," she noted.

"We are expecting that the people of Morocco will manifest, because we know that they are very [much in] solidarity with Palestine, but now we see they are under so much occupation, like we are. So with our fight for freedom, we are also going to liberate the Moroccan people from the regime of Morocco, from the corrupt king, Mohammed VI."

She noted that it is common for the Moroccan government to [make statements about how happy Saharawis are](#) with Moroccan rule and to provide choice examples of support for Moroccan rule. However, she said if that were really true, then Rabat would have nothing to fear from a referendum or from letting journalists freely report on events there instead of so tightly controlling them.

"Always Morocco says 'we have done this, we have made development, [we have given a lot of benefits to the Saharawis](#), the Saharawis are very happy with us, and they make these manifestations and gatherings that you have seen in Dakhla, Laayoune, that people are very happy with Morocco."

"Now my question is: if you are sure that the people are very with you, why don't you go to the referendum and you set up the problem, and then the Western Saharans will be Moroccan. And if you say Western Sahara is wonderful and a paradise, why don't you open it to the media, to international observers, to everybody? Why do you make it closed?"

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Watch as Chinese Helicopter Zips Through Highway Traffic Just Inches Above Road
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

China's Z-8 helicopter, derived from the French Super Frelon, has long been a staple of the Chinese armed forces, which is still finding new uses for the powerful heavy-lifter. However, using such a large aircraft for stunts was probably previously unknown.

Drivers along a rural highway in China got the shock of their lives recently when a People's Liberation Army (PLA) Z-8 helicopter appeared overhead.

In the video, which originated on Sina Weibo before going viral across social media, a car passenger films two different scenes. In the first, a Changhe Z-8 heavy transport helicopter zips toward the car, passing at a close but safe distance overhead.

Then, the video picks back up at some time after, with the Z-8 so close that at first it's not entirely clear what the viewer is looking at. However, as it pulls ahead of the car, its massive body becomes more recognizable.

It's then the chopper does something truly shocking: the daredevil pilot drops even lower, so that the helicopter's wheels are just inches above the pavement, and he matches the speed of traffic. Meanwhile, the people inside the car scream in amazement and disbelief.

It's impossible to know exactly what's going on here. Why a PLA pilot would perform such a dangerous maneuver without significant planning is unclear, but that also means this could be part of a promotional stunt of some kind. Also, the road loses a lane between the first and second videos, meaning these could either be two completely different incidents, or they happened some time apart.

[According to The War Zone, the helicopter's lack of visible](#) identifying markers suggests it comes from the PLA Navy Marine Corps, a fast-growing branch of the armed forces that only recently received helicopters. It's possible that Chinese marines simply want to prove they can [hot-dog as much as US Marine chopper pilots can](#).

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'Bandits' Release Over 300 Boys Kidnapped From Nigerian School Last Week
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari was elected in 2015 after promising to deal with the threat posed by Boko Haram and other militia groups. However, they remain capable of mounting mass attacks and kidnappings in new parts of the country. Nearly a week after more than 300 school boys were kidnapped from a school in northwestern Nigeria, they have been suddenly released. They were initially feared to have been taken by the Daesh-aligned group Boko Haram, but the local governor told reporters the kidnappers were simply "bandits."

[On Tuesday, the jihadist group claimed](#) to be behind the kidnapping, which took place during an armed nighttime raid in Kankara. In a video they released, a boy who said he was from Kankara says: "We have been caught by a gang of Abu Shekau," he said, referring to the head of Boko Haram. "Some of us were killed."

"You have to send them the money," he added, [according to the New York Times](#), as boys around him cried out "help us."

Aminu Bello Masari, the governor of Katsina State, [announced on television on Thursday evening](#) that 344 of the boys had been recovered in neighboring Zamfara State. According to the New York Times, he told reporters the state had negotiated the boys' freedom from "bandits," not Boko Haram.

This was far from Boko Haram's first mass kidnapping: in 2014, the Muslim fundamentalist group [abducted 276 girls in Chibok in Borno state](#), most of whom were Christian. The shocking seizure prompted an international campaign to "free our girls." At present, 112 of the girls are missing, with at least 13 presumed dead.

Buhari, who was elected in 2015 on the promise of effectively dealing with Boko Haram, released a statement late Thursday urging patience as his administration tries to resolve security disruptions around the country. He reiterated his promise to work for [the release of others kidnapped by Boko Haram](#), according to the Times.

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Astronomers Detect First Potential Radio Emission From Distant Alien World
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Although additional observations are needed to confirm recent findings by researchers, the discovery, if verified, could prove to be the very first recorded instance of a radio emission detected from a planet outside of our solar system.

A group of astronomers recently [published a study](#) in the journal Astronomy & Astrophysics that detailed recordings of radio bursts emanating from a distant exoplanet situated toward the constellation Boötes.

The potentially groundbreaking discovery, led by researchers from Cornell University, Paris Sciences et Lettres University and the Université d'Orléans, was made through the use of the Low Frequency Array, a large radio telescope network located in the Netherlands.

According to the group, the research initially began through observations conducted on Jupiter, as officials worked to better understand the connection between radio signals and a planet's magnetic field.

Their initial examinations ultimately served as a template for new reviews of similar planets located dozens of light-years from Earth. "We learned from our own Jupiter what this kind of detection looks like. We went searching for it and we found it," lead study author Jake Turner [said in a Cornell University release](#).

After scouring nearly 100 hours of radio observations, the team observed radio emissions from exoplanets orbiting stars toward the constellations of Cancer, Boötes and the Upsilon Andromedae systems; however, it was ultimately Boötes that proved to be the most intriguing for astronomers.

Upon further examination, researchers determined that only the Tau Boötes exoplanet system - located some 50-plus light-years away - exhibited a noteworthy radio signature that could allow them to gain further insight into the planet through its magnetic field.

Turner explained in his statement that a planet's magnetic field allows astronomers to get a better idea of the planet's interior and atmospheric properties, noting that Earth's magnetic field functions as a shield from the solar wind, allowing it to be habitable.

The team suggests that the radio signals emanating from the [exoplanet Tau Boötes b](#) were measured at a strength of about 5 to 11 gauss, a level within the magnetic field measurements detected from Jupiter. The similarities would suggest that the exoplanet's core is made of metallic hydrogen.

"We present one of the first hints of detecting an exoplanet in the radio realm," Turner said of his team's research. "We make the case for an emission by the planet itself. From the strength and polarization of the radio signal and the planet's magnetic field, it is compatible with theoretical predictions."

As the signal is also considered weak, the group notes in their findings that there is a possibility that the emission may have come from elsewhere. Turner and company are now undertaking a campaign to use multiple radio telescopes to follow up on the detected signal.

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French Police Detain Modeling Agent Who Allegedly Supplied Epstein With Underage Girls

by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Jean-Luc Brunel is a known talent scout who became the head of the Karin Models agency in the late 1970s; however, the Paris-born modeling agent was banned from the company in 1999 over abuse accusations. He later shifted gears and founded MC2 Model Management in the US with funding from financier Jeffrey Epstein.

Former Epstein associate Brunel was detained by authorities on Wednesday at France's Charles de Gaulle Airport, moments before the 74-year-old was due to board a plane bound for Dakar, Senegal.

A source familiar with the matter [told the Daily Mail](#) that Brunel was being held at a Paris police station and was being questioned about his ties to various Epstein associates, including detained socialite Ghislaine Maxwell and the UK's Prince Andrew, who has also been implicated in Epstein's criminal activity.

Citing confirmation from the Paris prosecutor's office, [The Guardian reported Thursday](#) that Brunel had been arrested as part of an ongoing investigation into "rapes, sexual assaults, the rape and sexual assault of a minor aged 15, the rape and sexual assault of a minor over 15 years, sexual harassment, association with criminals and the trafficking and exploitation of minors."

No formal charges against Brunel have been filed.

Thysia Huisman, a former Dutch model who worked with Brunel and accused him of drugging and raping her in 1991, [told the Associated Press](#) that his detainment was "such great news." She added that the development was the "best Christmas present ever."

Huisman is among several women who have spoken to French authorities for the investigation. The investigation by French authorities was opened on August 23, 2019, and has centered around the potential crimes "of a sexual nature" that may have been conducted by Epstein and his fellow accomplices. Amid the inquiry announcement, a [French advocacy group revealed](#) that it had received 10 witness statements about alleged sex crimes against minors that took place in France and involved Epstein.

Brunel has long been dogged by sexual abuse accusations, many of which date back to his time with the Karin Models agency in France; however, since investigations into Epstein were undertaken, US prosecutors and accusers have said Brunel used his connections to the modeling world to procure young girls for Epstein.

The [New York Daily News reported](#) that Brunel's Miami-based MC2 Model Management company was founded with a \$1 million investment from Epstein, and that agency models had frequently stayed at Epstein's Manhattan properties.

Epstein accuser Virginia Giuffre [alleged in court filings](#) that at one point Brunel went so far as to fly three 12-year-old girls to Epstein as a birthday present. "Jeffrey bragged afterwards after he met them that they were 12-year-olds and flown over from France because they're really poor over there, and their parents needed the money or whatever the case is and they were absolutely free to stay and flew out," she noted.

Since the allegations first surfaced, Brunel has repeatedly denied he had any involvement in Epstein's sex trafficking ring. Court records show that Brunel [filed a lawsuit](#) against his longtime friend in 2015, alleging that criminal accusations against Epstein had lost Brunel valuable business.

After Epstein's August 2019 death in a Manhattan prison cell, Brunel was reported to have disappeared from the public eye, as did Maxwell, who was later taken into US custody in July after being tracked down inside a New Hampshire home. Maxwell is presently at a [Brooklyn detention center](#), awaiting trial.

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'No Doubt': Iran's Rouhani Says US Will Rejoin 2015 Nuclear Deal, Lift Sanctions Under Biden by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Under the Trump administration, the US withdrew from the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), arguing that Iran had violated its terms and that the deal was not beneficial. The move reimposed sanctions lifted under the deal and was one of many decisions by the administration that heightened tensions with the Middle Eastern country.

Iranian President Hassan Rouhani remarked Thursday that he has "no doubt" that the incoming administration of US President-elect Joe Biden would prompt Washington to rejoin the 2015 nuclear deal.

In remarks made during the inauguration ceremony of nearly 100 infrastructure projects, Rouhani [told viewers](#) that the "three-year resistance of the Iranian nation will force the future US administration to succumb to the people and return to their commitments and break the sanctions."

"Our first task is to try to make sanctions ineffective or less effective," he said during a video conference, adding that efforts "should not be delayed even for an hour."

Iranian officials have stated the nation would be willing to return to the JCPOA on the condition that serious concessions are made, and that the US would compensate Iran in some manner for the economic setbacks caused by the sanctions.

As for Biden, the president-elect previously indicated that he would restart talks with Iran, noting that his first step in easing tensions with the country would be to rejoin the agreement; however, it's unclear how soon into his administration the issue may be taken up.

Rouhani's comments come just one day after Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei appeared to make similar remarks in support of the US rejoining the Obama-era agreement, which both Rouhani and Biden played a role in establishing.

Khamenei had said [during a televised address](#) that Iran needs to work to nullify the sanctions, but that "if the sanctions can be lifted in a correct, wise, Iranian-Islamic and dignified manner, this should be done."

The respective remarks indicated a rare union between the two Iranian officials, who have previously [butted heads](#) over how to best handle certain matters.

In May 2019, [Khamenei criticized](#) both Rouhani and Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif over the agreements settled on for the 2015 deal, telling university students during an event that he had "warned" the pair "several times" about his concerns. The comments echoed those he made in August 2018, when Khamenei said that Iranian negotiators [had "trespassed the red lines."](#)

Supported by several Republican allies, US President Donald Trump announced in May 2018 that he would be withdrawing the US from the nuclear deal that was agreed on by Iran and six other global powers - China, the EU, Germany, France, Russia and the UK. The move effectively began the process of reimplementing a series of sanctions on Iran's oil sales, financial transactions and construction imports as part of Trump's so-called "maximum pressure" strategy.

Tensions between Iran and the US have remained heated throughout much of Trump's term, with matters hitting an all-time high after the January 3 assassination of senior Iranian military leader Maj. Gen. Qasem Soleimani.

Rouhani, [more recently, stated](#) that while he was "not excited" by Biden's victory, he was indeed "happy" that the "terrorist Trump" would soon be leaving the Oval Office.

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Unwelcome Guest - Political Cartoon

With US President Donald Trump's time in the Oval Office coming to an end after electors of the Electoral College confirmed a win by Democratic challenger Joe Biden, the commander-in-chief seems to be stuck between a rock and a hard place, as some people aren't exactly thrilled about him living in their neck of the woods.

[Reports emerged earlier this week](#) that neighbors of Trump's Mar-a-Lago club issued a notice on Tuesday addressed to the town of Florida's Palm Beach and the US Secret Service that said the president could not use the so-called "winter White House" as his residence.

Concerned residents argued that Trump was not legally allowed to live at the estate because of a [1993 agreement](#) he made with the town that allowed him to convert the former Florida residence into a money-making club.

To make matters worse, it was reported Thursday that Trump may not even be preparing to leave the White House after Inauguration Day. [According to CNN](#), Trump has told several advisers of his intention to stick around, with one individual explaining to the outlet that the president is "throwing a f**king temper tantrum."

"He's going to leave. He's just lashing out," the source said.

Oy vey! At this point, it's anyone's guess where Trump may wind up after Biden is sworn in on January 20, 2021.

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California Readies 60 Storage Freezers, Thousands of Body Bags Amid 'Most Intense' COVID-19 Surge

by [Evan Craighead](#)

California's Department of Health recorded 53,711 new COVID-19 cases and at least 293 related deaths on December 15. While the state has begun receiving its first doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine, surging cases of the contagious disease continue to contribute to the ballooning death toll, which presently sits at about 21,500 fatalities.

Democratic California Governor Gavin Newsom announced on Tuesday that a total of 5,000 body bags had been distributed to the counties of Los Angeles, San Diego and Inyo.

"There is a light at the end of the tunnel — but we are still in the tunnel," Newsom highlighted during his COVID-19 response briefing. "We're going through perhaps the most intense and urgent moment since the beginning of this pandemic."

The governor detailed that 60 53-foot refrigerated storage units have been reserved by the state. The mobile morgues are on standby in various counties and hospitals across California. The state has averaged 32,352 new [COVID-19](#) cases and 174.6 deaths per day over the last week, according to estimates [provided by the LA Times](#). Comparatively, California's seven-day average for November 14 was 41 deaths.

"This is a deadly disease, and we need to be mindful of where we are," the governor stated. Newsom's grim warnings were issued alongside the rollout of his ["Vaccinate All 58" campaign](#), which seeks "collective, inclusive action across all 58 counties to get people vaccinated" for the novel coronavirus.

Essential health care workers and "those among our most vulnerable in long-term care settings" will be given priority for the first doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine.

The second dose will be administered some three weeks after the first.

"While we have prepared for this surge with beds and equipment, staffing shortages are real and impact our medical system," Newsom emphasized in the announcement, urging Californians to "wear a mask, reduce mixing, stay home, stop the spread and save lives."

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Pompeo Tells Turkish Minister Buying S-400 System Endangers US Personnel - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 17 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has warned the foreign minister of Turkey that Ankara's purchase of the Russian S-400 air defense system endangers the security of US personnel, the Department of State said in a readout.

"Secretary of State Michael Pompeo spoke this week with Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu to discuss the December 14 imposition of sanctions by the United States on our NATO Ally Turkey for its procurement of the Russian-made S-400 missile defense system," the readout said on Thursday. "Secretary Pompeo made clear to Foreign Minister Cavusoglu that Turkey's purchase of the S-400 system endangers the security of US personnel and military technology and allows Russian access to the Turkish armed forces and defense industry."

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FDA Advisory Committee Recommends Moderna's Coronavirus Vaccine for Emergency Use

WASHINGTON, December 17 (Sputnik) - The Food and Drug Administration's (FDA) Vaccine Advisory Committee has voted to recommend Moderna's coronavirus vaccine candidate for emergency use authorization.

"We have a favorable vote," Kathleen Hayes, the designated federal official who tallied the votes cast during the meeting, said in a live stream of Thursday.

An overwhelming majority of committee members - 20 out of 21 - answered "yes" to the question: "Based on the totality of scientific evidence available, do the benefits of the Moderna COVID-19 vaccine outweigh its risks for use in individuals 18 years of age and older."

While the committee did recommend the vaccine, some members, including the lone abstention Dr. James Hildreth, indicated they would like to see recipients narrowed down based on risk.

They said more evidence is needed to definitively say whether the benefits outweigh the risks for the broader population over the age of 18.

The Moderna vaccine is the second immunization greenlighted by the advisory committee.

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US Launches Phase 3 Trial of 2 New Antibody Treatments for COVID-19 - Health Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 17 (Sputnik) - The United States announced phase 3 clinical trials of two experimental drugs to treat hospitalized COVID-19 patients when combined with existing treatments, the National Institute for Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID) said in a press release.

"The trials are part of the ACTIV-3 master protocol, which has an adaptive design allowing investigators to add new sub-studies of additional investigational agents," the release said on Thursday.

ACTIV-3 refers to a NIAID protocol designed to test treatments using multiple drugs administered simultaneously, with trial participants either receiving the investigative agent or a placebo in addition to standard treatments, which typically include the antiviral drug remdesivir, the release said.

One sub-study will evaluate VIR-7831, a monoclonal antibody developed by GlaxoSmithKline in the United Kingdom and Vir Biotechnology in the United States. The other sub-study will evaluate a combination of BR11-196 and BR11-198, two monoclonal antibodies manufactured by Bii Biosciences in Beijing and the state of North Carolina, the release added. Monoclonal antibodies are grown in a lab as copies of naturally occurring proteins produced by the human immune system.

The protocol allows researchers to evaluate each antibody in a small group of volunteers, and then to enroll a larger group of volunteers if the antibody appears safe and effective. Initially, researchers will enroll approximately 450 volunteers who have been hospitalized with mild to moderate COVID-19 and fewer than 13 days of symptoms, the release said.

If the experimental drug appears to be safe and effective, each sub-study will enroll an additional 700 people, half receiving the drug and half a placebo. The primary endpoint of the trial is the participants' sustained recovery for 14 days after release from the hospital, the release added.

The United States previously authorized use of other antibody-based COVID-19 treatments, including one developed by Regeneron that was given to President Donald Trump.

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Twitter to Introduce New Function in 2021 to Help Users Identify Bots - Blog

WASHINGTON, December 17 (Sputnik) - Twitter announced on its blog that it will introduce next year a new function to allow users to distinguish between man-run and automated accounts.

"In 2021, we're planning to build a new account type to distinguish automated accounts from human-run accounts to make it easier for people to know what's a bot and what's not," the company said on Thursday.

Accounts that post to Twitter automatically, also called bots, can be used for sharing useful emergency notifications, but may also be a tool for propaganda and disinformation.

Twitter said it will also introduce next year an option whether to preserve so-called "memorial accounts" i.e. accounts of deceased users.

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Two US House Committees Probe Massive Cyber Attack - Statement

WASHINGTON, December 17 (Sputnik) - The chairpersons on two US House of Representatives committees announced that the panels launched a joint investigation into the wide-scale cyber attack on government and private networks.

"Our Committees are seeking information related to the apparent, widespread compromise of multiple federal government, critical infrastructure, and private sector information technology networks," Homeland Security Committee Chairman Bennie Thompson and Oversight and Reform Committee Chairwoman Carolyn Maloney wrote to the FBI, Homeland Security Department and the Office of the Director of National Intelligence .

Thompson and Maloney said the preliminary reports suggest the cyber intrusion could have "potentially devastating consequences for US national security."

On Thursday, the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) warned that governmental institutions, critical infrastructures and private entities face a "grave threat" as a result of the cyber attack.

CISA attributed the attack, which had been underway since at least March, to an advanced persistent threat actor.

CISA also said removing malware from the "compromised environments" will be highly complex and challenging.

The Washington Post reported earlier that a hacking group called APT29, also known as "the Dukes" or "Cozy Bear," allegedly linked to the Russian government, was likely behind the hacking but provided no proof for its claims.

Russia's Embassy in the United States dismissed media reports accusing Russian hackers as unfounded.

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General Motors Launches Factory Expansion to Make Infantry Vehicles for US Army

WASHINGTON, December 17 (Sputnik) - The defense subsidiary of General Motors (GM) began construction of a 75,000 square foot factory to produce the Infantry Squad Vehicle (ISV) for the US military, the company said in a press release.

Construction involves expanding an existing facility in the state of North Carolina as part of a \$214.3 million contract awarded by the US Army in June, the release said on Thursday.

"Construction at the 75,000-square-foot facility is expected to continue into early spring, and the production line will begin delivering vehicles in April. As GM Defense ramps to full-rate production, the facility will help to manufacture 649 ISVs and will support the production of up to 2,065 vehicles with additional authorization over eight years. The ISV program is the first major award for GM Defense since the subsidiary was re-established by its parent company in 2017," the release said.

The ISV is based on the 2020 Chevrolet Colorado ZR2 midsize truck, and 90 percent of the vehicle will consist of commercially available parts, the release added.

The 5,000 pound vehicle designed for expeditionary missions is light enough to be sling loaded on a UH-60 Blackhawk helicopter and compact enough to fit inside a CH-47 Chinook chopper, according to the release.

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Pentagon Can Not Track Lost Weapons, Aid to Afghanistan Worth Billions - Report

WASHINGTON, December 17 (Sputnik) - The US Defense Department has lost track of billions of dollars worth of military equipment supplied to the Afghan armed forces, has no effective

mechanism for getting it back and expects losses to continue, the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) said in a report.

"SIGAR found that CSTC-A [Combined Security Transition Command - Afghanistan] ... inventoried only 40 percent of applicable articles during the 365-day period from May 2019 through April 2020," the report said on Thursday.

Additionally, SIGAR found that CSTC-A had not inventoried at least 678 of the 12,681 active items subject to enhanced end-use monitoring (EUM) requirements since the beginning of Fiscal Year 2017, the report also said.

"According to CSTC-A officials, the command has never met its 100-percent inventory requirement and is unlikely to ever do so because the security situation in Afghanistan prevents some inventories from taking place," the report added.

Without required inventories of some 60 percent of enhanced EUM-designated transferred articles which are among the most sensitive of all defense articles transferred to the Afghan government, the CSTC-A lacks a complete account of articles in use by the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces, according to the report.

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US Energy Dept, National Nuclear Security Admin Breached in Hacking - Report

WASHINGTON, December 17 (Sputnik) – The US Energy Department and National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA), which is responsible for nation's nuclear arsenal, have evidence that hackers compromised their networks, Politico reported on Thursday, citing officials directly familiar with the matter.

Suspicious activities have been uncovered in networks at the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC), Sandia and Los Alamos national laboratories, as well as at several offices of the Energy Department, the report said.

The US Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) earlier on Thursday warned that all levels of the US government were in "grave" peril after the massive hacking attack, which reportedly affected the Pentagon, Commerce Department, Department of Homeland Security, Treasury and National Institutes of Health.

The Washington Post reported earlier that a hacking group called APT29, also known as "the Dukes" or "Cozy Bear," allegedly linked to the Russian government, was likely behind the hacking but provided no proof for its claims. The Russian Embassy in the United States has dismissed media reports accusing Russian hackers as unfounded.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, December 18 (Sputnik)

PUTIN HOLDS NEWS CONFERENCE

- * Russian President Vladimir Putin on Thursday warned there would be interference in Russian elections, but assured the public the government was ready to counter it.
- * Putin laid out a plan to half the number of people living below the poverty line in Russia over the coming decade.
- * Putin described opposition figure Alexei Navalny's claims of having been poisoned by the Russian security services as part of an information war against the country.
- * Putin said completing the Nord Stream 2 pipeline project was in the national interest of Germany and the European Union.
- * Russian hackers neither helped incumbent US President Donald Trump win the election in 2016 nor meddled in the US internal political affairs in any way, Putin said.
- * The US Department of State and US intelligence agencies are the authors of fake news about Russian hackers, Putin said.

EU SANCTIONS AGAINST BELARUS

- * The European Union is enacting the third package of sanctions against Belarus, according to a statement published in the Official Journal on Thursday.
- * The European Union is ready to expand sanctions against Belarusian entities and individuals if the situation in the country does not improve, the European Council said.

NEW ANTI-TRUST LAWSUIT AGAINST GOOGLE

- * A group of 38 US states has filed a new anti-trust lawsuit against Google aimed at ending the internet search giant's "illegal monopoly," New York Attorney-General Letitia James said in a statement on Thursday.

NAGORNO-KARABAKH DEVELOPMENTS

- * Almost 460 people returned to their Nagorno-Karabakh homes from Armenia over the previous 24-hour period, the Russian Defense Ministry said on Thursday.
- * Over 50 Armenian citizens who were held captive by Azerbaijan after the recent armed conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh have returned to their homeland over the past weeks, Artak Beglaryan, human rights ombudsman of the unrecognized Artsakh Republic, told Sputnik.

CAS DECISION ON RUSSIAN ATHLETES

- * The Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) barred Russian officials, including ministers, from attending Olympic Games and Paralympic Games for two years, the court said in a release on Thursday.
- * Russian athletes will not be able to compete in major international competitions under the Russian flag until December 16, 2022, according to the CAS ruling.
- * The Russian Anti-Doping Agency (RUSADA) said in a statement that it was not fully satisfied with the decision of the CAS on the claim of the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA).
- * Russian Sports Minister Oleg Matytsin said that he regretted the decision of the CAS to adopt sanctions against top Russian government officials and called it incorrect.

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Trump Optimistic over Gulf Rift Resolution - White House

WASHINGTON, December 17 (Sputnik) - US President Donald Trump told Saudi King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud on Thursday that he is optimistic about mending ties between Qatar and its neighbors, White House spokesperson Judd Deere said via Twitter.

"Today, President @realDonaldTrump spoke with King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud of Saudi Arabia ... President Trump thanked King Salman for his leadership and expressed his optimism toward resolving the Gulf Rift," Deere said.

The two leaders discussed regional security and key bilateral issues, he added.

In June 2017, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates severed relations with Qatar and imposed a blockade on the country over its support of Islamist groups that they view as terrorist organizations. US officials have recently said that they are working to reconcile Gulf monarchies before Trump leaves office.

US Voters Give Biden Edge Over Trump in Job Approval During Presidential Transition – Poll

WASHINGTON, December 17 (Sputnik) – A 56 percent majority of US voters approve of President-elect Joe Biden's performance during the transitional period between his election and inauguration, a Rasmussen Reports poll showed on Thursday.

By comparison, outgoing US President Donald Trump enjoyed 47 percent support in a similar poll as he prepared to take office four years ago, Rasmussen said in a press release.

"[The] survey finds that 56% of Likely US Voters approve of Biden's job performance to date, with 38% who Strongly Approve. Forty percent (40%) disapprove, including 31% who Strongly Disapprove," the release said.

That compares to an identical 47 percent who approved and disapproved of Trump at the same point in late 2016, the release added.

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CISA Issues Warning of 'Grave Threat' to US Agencies, Private Entities From Cyberattack

WASHINGTON, December 17 (Sputnik) - The Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) warned on Thursday that US governmental institutions, critical infrastructure and private entities are facing a grave threat after a massive hacking attack that was discovered earlier in the week.

"CISA has determined that this threat poses a grave risk to the Federal Government and state, local, tribal, and territorial governments as well as critical infrastructure entities and other private sector organizations," the agency said in a statement.

CISA did not identify the attackers, but said cyberattack has been ongoing since at least March 2020 by "an advanced persistent threat actor."

The agency admitted that removing malware from what it calls "compromised environments" will be highly complex and challenging for government entities and private organizations.

The Washington Post reported earlier that a hacking group called APT29, also known as "the Dukes" or "Cozy Bear," allegedly linked to the Russian government, was likely behind the hacking but provided no proof for its claims.

The Russian Embassy in the United States dismissed media reports accusing Russian hackers for the cyberattack as unfounded.

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Republicans Lead in Runoff Election to Decide Which Party Controls US Senate - Poll

WASHINGTON, December 17 (Sputnik) - Republican candidates running for two open US Senate seats in a runoff election in Georgia, a race that will decide which party controls the upper chamber of Congress, hold identical 3 percent leads over their respective Democratic opponents, an Emerson College poll revealed on Thursday.

"Republican incumbents David Perdue and Kelly Loeffler hold nearly identical 51 percent to 48 percent advantages over Democratic challengers Jon Ossoff and Raphael Warnock," a press release explaining the poll said.

Georgia scheduled a runoff vote on January 5 because neither of the state's two incumbent senators, Perdue or Loeffler, topped the 50 percent threshold needed for an outright victory in the November 3 election.

A demographic breakdown in the Emerson College poll helps explain the shift in Georgia from a Republican stronghold to a state now up for grabs by either political party.

The Democratic base of support lies with 18-29-year-olds, who are breaking for Warnock with 71 percent of the vote, and similarly for Ossoff with 70 percent of the vote. The race tightens among 30-44-year-olds, as Ossoff leads Perdue 50-47 percent, while Warnock and Loeffler each receive 49 percent, the release said.

A clear Republican advantage surfaces in the first group of older voters, ages 45-64, who back Perdue by a 57-42 percent margin while favoring Loeffler 58-42 percent. Seniors age 65 and older give Purdue a 59-41 percent advantage and Loeffler a 58-42 percent edge.

Democrats need to win at least one of the two open seats to gain control of the Senate with a 50-50 tie, which would be broken by Vice President-elect Kamala Harris, since the US constitution gives the vice president a tie-breaker role.

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Biden Says Will Impose 'Substantial Costs' on Those Behind Cyberattackers

WASHINGTON, December 17 (Sputnik) - US President-elect Joe Biden on Thursday said his administration would impose "substantial costs" on those responsible for cyberattacks, in his first reaction to a massive hacking of the country's governmental and private networks.

"We need to disrupt and deter our adversaries from undertaking significant cyber attacks in the first place. We will do that by, among other things, imposing substantial costs on those responsible for such malicious attacks, including in coordination with our allies and partners," Biden said in a statement.

The US Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) warned on Thursday that governmental institutions, critical infrastructures and private entities are in "grave" peril after the massive hacking attack. CISA did not identify suspects, but attributed the attack underway since at least March 2020 to "an advanced persistent threat actor." It admitted that removing malware from "compromised environments" would be highly complex and challenging.

The Washington Post reported earlier that a hacking group called APT29, also known as "the Dukes" or "Cozy Bear," allegedly linked to the Russian government, was likely behind the hacking but provided no proof for its claims. The Russian Embassy in the United States has dismissed media reports accusing Russian hackers as unfounded.

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US Urges Immediate Return of Kidnapped Boys From School in Nigeria - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 17 (Sputnik) - The United States is calling for an immediate return of the boys kidnapped from a government school in the town of Kankara in Nigeria, US State Department Principal Deputy Spokesperson Cale Brown said in a statement on Thursday.

The United States condemns the violent kidnapping of the more than 300 boys from the Government Secondary Science School in Kankara, Katsina State on December 11," Brown said. "The boys must be returned to their families immediately and those responsible for this attack held accountable to the full extent of the law."

On December 12, armed Islamic militants attacked the school, which services 800 students. Many students managed to escape and returned home, but 258 families said their children were still missing. The Boko Haram terror organization took responsibility for the attack.

Brown offered sympathies to the families of the missing students and the security guard killed in the attack.

Russia condemns the attack on the Nigerian school that resulted in hundreds of kidnapped students, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said on Wednesday.

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US Registers New Daily Record of 3,656 COVID-19-Related Deaths - Johns Hopkins University

WASHINGTON, December 17 (Sputnik) - The US authorities reported 3,656 coronavirus-related deaths, representing a new daily record since the beginning of the pandemic, data compiled by Johns Hopkins University revealed on Thursday.

"Yesterday, the country reported 247,403 new confirmed cases and 3,656 deaths," the data revealed.

Wednesday became the fourth day since the beginning of the pandemic when the US has registered more than 3,000 coronavirus-related fatalities.

As of Thursday afternoon, the authorities have reported more than 17 million cases and more than 308,000 virus-related deaths, the Johns Hopkins University data showed.

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US Global Leadership Suffers Record Low Approval in Poll of 29 Nations

WASHINGTON, December 17 (Sputnik) - Approval of the United States hit record lows among 20 of 29 nations - including many longtime US allies - in a global survey published Thursday by Gallup with just over a month before President-elect Joe Biden takes over.

Median approval across the 29 countries stood at 18 percent in 2020, down from 22 percent during the 2017, the first year of the Trump presidency, a press release explaining the poll said.

"Even worse news is the number of [US] allies on the list of countries where approval dropped to historic lows: Ireland (20 percent), the United Kingdom (15 percent), Denmark (14 percent), Switzerland (10 percent), Germany (6 percent) and Iceland (5 percent)," the release said.

Gallup noted that the US image took a hit during a tumultuous year for most countries due to the coronavirus pandemic and continuing disengagement from global affairs by the Trump administration, which pulled out of the World Health Organization and announced troop withdrawals from NATO ally Germany.

However, ratings of US leadership in a handful of countries improved to their highest levels of the Trump presidency, albeit below record highs: Ecuador (43 percent), Japan (39 percent), Australia (29 percent) and New Zealand (26 percent).

Ratings for the United States among Russians also surged to the highest level in the Trump presidency, 18 percent compared with 8 percent in 2017. Russian disapproval of US leadership also hit a four year high of 71 percent.

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US, Turkmenistan Expand Military, Business Cooperation in New Talks - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 10 (Sputnik) - The delegations from United States and Turkmenistan have agreed during the just concluded annual bilateral talks to expand military cooperation and business ties, the US Department of State said in a media note on Thursday.

"Today, the United States and Turkmenistan concluded three days of productive Annual Bilateral Consultations (ABCs)," the note said. "The Turkmen and US delegations emphasized the significance of their growing military cooperation ... and opportunities for US companies to expand business and investment in Turkmenistan."

The US delegation was led by Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia Dean Thompson and the Turkmen delegation by Deputy Chairman and Foreign Minister Rashid Meredov, the note said.

"Through the Annual Bilateral Consultations, the C5+1 regional diplomatic platform, and other high-level dialogues, the United States looks forward to strengthening its relationship with Turkmenistan, an important partner in a region of global significance," the note added.

The US delegation also offered Turkmenistan assistance in addressing labor rights, religious freedom and other fundamental rights, according to the note.

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US Charges 6 Men in Plot to Kidnap State of Michigan Governor Whitmer - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 17 (Sputnik) - A US grand jury indicted six men in a conspiracy to kidnap Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer, the Justice Department announced in a press release on Thursday.

"The six were previously charged by complaint, but under the United States Constitution, the government must present such a felony case to a grand jury and obtain an indictment to proceed with the prosecution," US Attorney Andrew Birge said in the release.

Prosecutors said earlier that suspects included 14 anti-government militants angered by the COVID-19 stay-at-home restrictions imposed by Whitmer.

Whitmer was never harmed and the plot was exposed by a paid informant and undercover agents embedded in the group. Authorities initially arrested 13 suspects in October, media reported.

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Coronavirus Cases in US Surpass 17 Million - Johns Hopkins University

WASHINGTON, December 17 (Sputnik) - The number of novel coronavirus cases in the United States has exceeded 17 million, data compiled by Johns Hopkins University showed on Thursday.

The number of people who have tested positive for the novel coronavirus in the United States stood at 17,000,408 as of Thursday morning.

There have been 307,000 coronavirus-related deaths in the United States since the start of the pandemic earlier this year.

More than 1 million people have tested positive for the novel coronavirus in the last four days and with 10,000 coronavirus-related deaths.

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Pandemic Unmasks Racial Disparities in US Health Care - Health Secretary Nominee

WASHINGTON, December 17 (Sputnik) - The novel coronavirus pandemic has revealed racial disparities in the US healthcare system, California Attorney General Xavier Becerra, who is nominated to be the next Health Secretary, said on Thursday.

"Our disjointed healthcare system in America made it possible to camouflage those health disparities for a long time. The ACA did a great job in making people aware of the fact that so many people were being left out," Becerra said.

Becerra characterized the novel coronavirus as being the "great unmasker."

"There was no way that any American could now deny that people in America are receiving healthcare differently because of their race or ethnicity, because of a disability," he said.

If confirmed, Becerra will become the first Latino to lead the Health and Human Services Department and face the task of dealing with the coronavirus pandemic.

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US Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Meets With Afghan, Taliban Leaders

WASHINGTON, December 17 (Sputnik) - US Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) Chairman Gen. Mark Milley met separately earlier this week with representatives of the Taliban movement to press them to commit to a reduction of violence, JCS spokesperson Sarah Flaherty said in a statement on Thursday.

"In coordination with the Department of State and the Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation (SRAR), the Chairman Milley and SRAR negotiators met with Taliban representatives in Doha, Qatar as part of the military channel established in the US-Taliban agreement," Flaherty said. "The Chairman discussed the need for an immediate reduction of violence."

Milley also urged accelerating the progress toward a negotiated political solution, which contributes to regional stability and safeguards US national interests, Flaherty said.

"The most important part of the discussions I had with both the Taliban and the government of Afghanistan was the need for a reduction in violence," Milley told the traveling press in Kabul, as quoted by Defense One.

Milley meeting with Taliban negotiators in Doha, Qatar, lasted for more than two hours, while his discussion with Afghan President Ashraf Ghani took place on Wednesday, the news outlet noted, without providing additional details. Milley is the first known US JCS chief to have met with Taliban officials.

Intra-Afghan peace negotiations began in the Qatari capital of Doha back in September. Both sides have recently announced that they agreed on the framework of the talks, allowing for discussions on substantive issues to begin. At the same time, violent clashes between the Afghan forces and the radical movement, as well as bomb blasts, continue to ravage Afghanistan.

In early November, the US announced plans to reduce by January 15 the number of its troops in Afghanistan and Iraq to 2,500 in each country.

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New US Maritime Strategy Targets Russia, China Moves to Control Sea Lanes

WASHINGTON, December 17 (Sputnik) - The United States plans to target "aggressive moves" by China and Russia to dominate key international waterways in a maritime strategy jointly announced by the Navy, Marines and Coast Guard in a report on Thursday.

"Our globally deployed naval forces interact with Chinese and Russian warships and aircraft daily. We witness firsthand their increasing sophistication and growing aggressiveness. Optimism that China and Russia might become responsible leaders contributing to global security has given way to recognition that they are determined rivals," the report dubbed "Advantage at Sea" said.

The report emphasizes the maritime domain is integral not only to the United States' security and prosperity but to those of all nations, an accompanying press release said.

The strategy commits the United States to work with allied and partner nations to project power in disputed sea lanes to deter potential adversaries, the release added.

Should fighting break out, the US will deploy attack submarines, fifth-generation aircraft, naval expeditionary forces, unmanned vehicles, and maritime raids to overwhelm enemy defenses, according to the report.

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Trump Denies Connection to 'Potential Prosecution' of Hunter Biden

WASHINGTON, December 17 (Sputnik) - US President Donald Trump denied on Thursday any connection to the "potential prosecution" of Hunter Biden, president-elect Joe Biden's son.

"I have NOTHING to do with the potential prosecution of Hunter Biden, or the Biden family. It is just more Fake News. Actually, I find it very sad to watch!" Trump said via Twitter.

Hunter Biden announced last week that the US Attorney's Office in Delaware is investigating his tax affairs.

Trump had earlier publicly called on the US authorities to take action over Hunter Biden's alleged activities in Ukraine while he was member of the board of directors in the energy company Burisma.

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US Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Meets With Afghan, Taliban Leaders

WASHINGTON, December 17 (Sputnik) – US Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) Chairman Gen. Mark Milley told reporters on Thursday that he met separately earlier this week with leaders of Afghanistan and the Taliban movement to press both sides to commit to a reduction of violence. "The most important part of the discussions I had with both the Taliban and the government of Afghanistan was the need for a reduction in violence," Milley told the traveling press in Kabul, as quoted by Defense One.

The top US general's meeting with the Taliban negotiators in Doha, Qatar lasted for more than two hours, while his discussion with Afghan President Ashraf Ghani took place on Wednesday, the news outlet noted, without providing additional details. Milley is the first known US JCS chief to have met with Taliban officials.

Intra-Afghan peace negotiations began in the Qatari capital of Doha back in September. Both sides have recently announced that they agreed on the framework of the talks, allowing for discussions on substantive issues to begin. At the same time, violent clashes between the Afghan forces and the radical movement, as well as bomb blasts, continue to ravage Afghanistan.

In early November, the US announced plans to reduce by January 15 the number of its troops in Afghanistan and Iraq to 2,500 in each country.

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US Weekly Jobless Claims Rise 3% to 885,000 for Week to Dec 12 - Labor Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 17 (Sputnik) - Some 885,000 Americans filed for jobless benefits last week, about 3 percent more than the previous week, Labor Department data showed on Thursday, as the US job market recovery continued to struggle nine months into the coronavirus pandemic.

"In the week ending December 12, the advance figure for seasonally adjusted initial claims was 885,000," the department said in a news release. It revised upward claims in the previous week to December 5 to 862,000 from a previously published 853,000. That increased the latest week's claims by 23,000, or about 3 percent.

In the previous week, claims rose by 19 percent.

The latest jobless statistics were not entirely bad. Continuing weekly claims, reported with a one-week lag but sometimes considered a better gauge of the labor market, fell to 5.51 million from a previous 5.78 million. The unemployment rate also slipped by 0.1 percentage point to 3.8 percent.

Yet, the rise in absolute claims is expected to put more urgency into lawmakers in Congress to agree on a fiscal package that could extend immediate aid to unemployed Americans.

Congress passed the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act in March, dispensing roughly \$2.2 trillion as paycheck protection for workers, loans and grants for businesses and other personal aid for qualifying citizens and residents.

In the past few months, however, Democrats in the House of Representatives and Republicans in the Senate have been locked in a bitter disagreement about a successive relief plan to the CARES Act. The stalemate was broken two weeks ago after a bipartisan group proposed a \$908 billion relief bill, which led the two sides to resume negotiations. As of Wednesday, negotiators reported good progress in the talks, but no final deal has been agreed.

Despite hope offered by vaccines, the coronavirus pandemic has raged anew in the United States in recent weeks, after a respite in the summer to early fall period. The total number of infections since January is now nearing 17 million, while hospitalization has hit daily record highs of above 100,000 and deaths have breached 300,000.

More than 21 million Americans lost their jobs between March and April, at the height of lockdowns forced by the COVID-19 pandemic. A rebound of 2.5 million jobs was logged in May and 4.8 million in June, before the recovery began slowing. For both September and October, less than 700,000 jobs were added each month. In November, there were just 245,000 additions.

The US economy shrank by 5 percent in the first quarter and a record 31.4 percent in the subsequent three months before rebounding by 33.1 percent in the third quarter.

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Boeing's 737 MAX Jet Clears Key Hurdle in Bid to Return to Skies in Canada

TORONTO, December 18 (Sputnik) - Canada's aviation regulators approved the design changes to the Boeing 737 MAX aircraft thereby clearing the first hurdle to allow the jet to be used in the country.

"Transport Canada aviation safety experts have completed their independent review of the design changes to the Boeing 737 MAX aircraft recently certified by the United States Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), and have now validated these changes," Transport Canada said in a statement on Thursday.

The regulatory approval allows the proposed design modifications to be made to aircraft registered in Canada.

However, before the 373 MAX can take the skies again, Canadian regulators stipulated that Boeing must come into compliance with the country's Airworthiness Directive, must reflect the changes in pilot training programs and conduct maintenance checks on the airplanes, which have been grounded for an extended period of time.

The planes were initially grounded following two fatal accidents involving 737 MAX - a Lion Air crash in Indonesia in October 2018, and the Ethiopian Airlines crash in March 2019.

Investigations into the crashes revealed errors in the functioning of the jet's piloting system, lapses in Boeing's safety standard procedures and cover-ups by company officials.

The US Federal Aviation Administration the 737 MAX to resume flights last month, albeit under similar prerequisites as Canada.